

Restaurant Forum

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE GEORGIA RESTAURANT ASSOCIATION

SPECIAL
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ISSUE



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into Its Strategic Goals,
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Going Green at Emory

University Incorporates Sustainability into Its Strategic Goals, Dining Halls and Restaurants

By Christy Simo

While the organic movement is still going strong, sustainability is leading the pack when it comes to environmental concerns. Restaurant owners and the general public are increasingly concerned about preserving farmland, nurturing the local economy, rising energy costs and food safety issues.

Emory University is at the forefront of the sustainability movement, and is the first major institution to make a significant commitment to local and sustainably grown food in Georgia. Along with reducing food waste and encouraging mass transportation, the university just a few miles outside Atlanta has committed to procuring 75% of the food served on campus from local or sustainably grown sources by 2015.

Buying food from local sources often equals fresher, tastier food; encourages a strong local economy; and reduces the use of fossil fuels for transportation, in turn lowering Emory's contribution to greenhouse

gas emissions and to the depletion of nonrenewable resources.

But just being local isn't enough. The school also takes into consideration other concerns, such as whether the animals were raised under stressful conditions, whether farmers use pesticides or other chemicals and whether the workers are paid fairly.

It's an ambitious effort, but the logistics of finding enough sustainable food will be a challenge. While many restaurants now serving organic and sustainable foods may plate 150-200 meals a night, Emory serves an average of 6,000 meals a day.

Created in 2006 by the university, the Office of Sustainability Initiatives researched and developed a set of purchasing guidelines to help guide the school toward a more sustainable future. (See Emory's purchasing guidelines at www.emory.edu/sustainability.)

The office is also responsible for establishing an on-campus

Emory University's Goodrich C. White Professor of Anthropology and Sustainable Food, Committee Chair, Peggy Barlett; Emory Dining Resident District Manager and member of the sustainable food committee, Joe Mitchell; Emory Dining Sustainability Coordinator and member of the sustainable food committee, Christy Cook; Emory University Senior Director of Food Service and member of the sustainable food committee, Patty Erbach



Waste Not, Want Not

Having a sustainable kitchen starts with the food, but it ends with garbage. Kitchens can acquire a good deal of food waste, but instead of throwing everything into a dumpster at the end of the day, Emory has invested in a product called the Orca, which transforms compost material into greywater. After adding 40 gallons of water, the machine will turn 1,200 pounds of compostable material into 350 gallons of greywater within 24 hours. This water can then be used in restrooms or to water the lawns.

The school is also reusing its cooking oil, transforming it into biofuel. "We've been participating in a bio-diesel program since October or November 2006," says Christy Cook, Regional Sustainability Coordinator for Sodexho, which manages the Emory Dining food service on campus. "We processed over 65,000 gallons of cooking oil into biofuel in the last year. That's a lot of cooking oil."

Other ways Emory has reduced waste is installing one-at-a-time napkin dispensers, and investing in additional china and silverware.

"The university has set a goal that by 2015, 95% of all food waste can be deterred from the landfill," Cook says. "We think with the Orca machine and recycling, in the next three to six months we can be down to 75% of meeting that 95% goal."

farmers' market, adapting campus dining facilities to provide healthy food choices and starting community gardens on campus.

To help reach out to local farmers who may not be aware of the university's initiative, Emory has partnered with Georgia Organics and hired its own farmer liaison, Chaz Holt, in October 2007.

"I try to link the gaps between institutional buying and small-scale farming, which is basically re-linking the farm to the table," says Holt, who travels around the state encouraging producers to meet Emory's quality and quantity food standards. "We're looking to establish a relationship for seasonal diets on a large-scale institutional buying scale to try to get that connection."

One way to re-establish that connection is to use foods according to when they are in season locally. Seasonal dining also helps lessen the impact on the environment. Eating a summer fruit in winter, for example, means the fruit had to travel many miles and use more gasoline to reach the diner's plate, making it less sustainable.

To ensure that the produce is from environmentally friendly farms that treat workers and animals fairly, the school has partnered with Portland, OR-based Food Alliance, a nonprofit that operates a certification program for food produced by farmers, ranchers and food processors that use environmentally and socially responsible practices.

TURNING STUDENTS GREEN

Food service provider Sodexho, which operates as Emory Dining on campus, is working with the university to incorporate more sustainable foods into the dining hall menus.

"We require that produce companies need to source a certain amount of local products, bottom line," says Christy Cook, Regional Sustainability Coordinator for Sodexho. "We want to be there to support the community and support local farms, and we require our vendor partners to support that initiative as well."

Emory Dining started introducing sustainable options into the dining halls in January 2007, and recently began serving organic,

sustainable ice cream. "Everything about this ice cream is either local, organic, natural or sustainable ingredients," Cook says. "Period." With flavors such as White Chocolate Brownie and using fresh fruits like blueberries and pears, the ice cream was a big hit. But there was an ulterior motive besides just serving delicious ice cream.

"Ultimately, that ice cream program helps us to meet the demands of purchasing more local products, but we did it in a way that's inventive," Cook says. "It's fun, and it not only engages our staff, but it pleases our clients as well."

Those clients include not only students, but also hospital staff and visitors, university faculty and staff, and the nearby community. Still, it's the students who are the biggest users of the facilities, and encouraging them to change their eating habits while also educating them on the importance and benefits of eating both organic and sustainable foods is key to the initiative's success.

To that end, the school recently held a Sustainable Food Fair and Farmers Market in September, where local producers showcased their produce and offered samples of recipes like bourbon pear pecan ice cream to show just how good local food can be.

Emory has also created three small sustainable gardens scattered across campus. The educational gardens feature fruits and vegetables according to the season.

"They're not really about producing any serious quantity of food, but what they are about is highlighting the seasons and highlighting what foods look like," says Goodrich C. White professor of anthropology Peggy Barlett, who is also Chair of the Sustainable Food Committee and faculty liaison to the Office of Sustainability Initiatives. "Everybody who sees them is really quite enchanted with these gardens."

So enchanted, in fact, that plans are in the works for more gardens to be developed on campus.

RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

Although the interest and support for sustainability is certainly there, the university still faces some challenges in accomplishing its ambitious goal. While it would seem that with the growing popularity of the organic and sustainable movements there should be an overflow of local farmers who have an abundance of crops just waiting to be sold, but that just isn't the case.

"Here [in Georgia], we don't have a lot of producers who are either organic or sustainable," Barlett says. "So we're having to really jump-start a new part of the food system and encourage more producers in this direction."

"Most of the farmers are already selling to someone," Cook agrees. "There's not a lot of surplus of produce just waiting to be sold."

Because Emory uses such a large quantity of food daily, there is also the issue of how to get enough of a single crop to prepare the same menu item for thousands of people. Holt is hoping to find farmers willing to work together to fulfill that need.

"Very rarely will there be one farm dealing with Emory directly," he says. "It will be more like a farmer grower group, or a co-op that has come together, [although] we probably won't have to deal with

more than one when it comes to cheese, yogurts and milks."

The other issue is financial. Right now, organic and sustainable foods carry a higher price tag, so the university must look closely at cost-cutting measures and low-cost ways to incorporate more expensive sustainable foods into the menus.

"That's the dilemma with institutional buying," Holt notes. "We're not just serving 150 high-end meals a night. We're serving 6,000 meals a day with a meal plan where we're trying to keep our price points [reasonable]."

The obvious solution would be to raise prices, but that may not be the best option.

"As we make decisions on campus, we have to be conscientious of cost," Cooks says. "We don't want to raise our prices so that the most affordable options are the unhealthy options."

While the price may raise slightly for the retail diners — those paying cash for their meals — those on the dining hall meal plan may instead see smaller portions to offset the more expensive produce. This would also in turn help Emory reduce the amount of food waste (*see sidebar on Page 23 for more of Emory's efforts to reduce waste*).

Using foods when they are in season is another way to reduce costs, although there is the concern that using too much of one food can become mundane to the diners.

"That's a good challenge to have for our culinarians because it allows us to experiment with recipes," Cook says. "It allows us to make a

memory for a student of that one time that they had something they'd never had before, and it may be different, but it was good."

Using seasonal foods can reduce the expense and also encourage healthier eating, but the school must consider environmental issues that are out of their control, such as a drought.

"The 75% takes into account understanding it is seasonal production," Holt says. "We understand there are environmental problems, maybe a low yield. So for that last 25%, we have to accommodate out-of-season produce or getting them from out of the region."

The other issue is that in the summer, when most produce is overflowing, most students are not on campus to eat the abundance of food. So Emory has purchased a dehydrator and a Cryovac machine so they can dehydrate and reuse the produce later when it's not in season.

"We're looking at the safety of those measures, but that way we can keep produce purchases up and provide local products when it's not even in season," Cook says.

Of course, serving thousands of people a day, Emory is also concerned about liability issues. One bad plate of spinach could cause a lawsuit that puts Emory out of business, so Sodexho takes on that liability as its food service provider. "Our first priority is food safety," Cook says. "We have to make sure that the farmers and growers we do business with are following safe food practices and have liability insurance."

To reach the 75% by 2015 goal, Emory has started out small with programs such as the ice cream machine and The Fresh Food Market,

Emory faculty dining room uses signage and education to connect the food with the local growers.



PHOTO BY HAWTHORPE STUDIOS

Sustainability Focus at Conference Center Restaurants

The Emory Conference Center Hotel, which is affiliated with Emory University, is also incorporating more sustainable and organic foods into its restaurants and special events menus.

The Conference Center made the decision four years ago to undergo the stringent Green Seal certification process. It is the only hotel in Georgia to receive this designation. Green Seal-certified hotels must minimize their waste, implement energy efficiency and conservation measures, reduce water usage, minimize the use of hazardous substances, restrict what goes down the drain as wastewater and establish a policy to purchase green products.

The Conference Center is currently undergoing a major expansion and renovation with the kitchen undergoing a renovation at the same time. While the physical dimensions of the kitchen will not change, it will incorporate more energy-efficient and environmentally friendly equipment, such as replacing or improving existing ways to dispose of grease traps. The expansion itself will be LEED Silver, with the existing building retrofitted to earn a LEED EB designation.

In addition to kitchen equipment changes, Michael Klein, CEC, CCA, Executive Chef for the Emory Conference Center, and Vincent Marra, CEC, Executive Chef of the Houston Mill House, a restaurant and special events facility owned by Emory University, are working to incorporate more organic and sustainable foods into their menus.

"Being associated with Emory University, there's a lot of interest in green, local, sustainable and organic," Chef Klein says. "We've made a lot of connections with the local growers and the local farmers. We can develop menus based on what they supply us in an effort to really focus on things that require less transportation and use different growing methods, like grass-fed beef and raising pigs in a completely organic environment."

Emory Conference Center's Executive Chef, Michael Klein, CEC, CCA, and Houston Mill House Executive Chef Vincent Marra, CEC review blueprints for the new conference center kitchen.



a corner market in the Cox dining hall that emphasizes local and organic sandwiches, snacks and other produce. Still, it's a long road to meeting the bigger objective.

Despite the potential roadblocks, the benefits of sustainable dining far outweigh the challenges.

"What you do is start small with a few items," Barlett says. "It's a very ambitious goal to aim for this much of a change in our food service, but I think we can do it."

Sustainable dining can also lead to a healthier student body and healthier employees.

"Emory University's sustainability efforts are amazing," adds Cathy Johnson, the Emory Conference Center General Manager. "We couldn't do half of what we do without the support of the university and where they're trying to go."

The Conference Center finds it is able to work around a limited offering of seasonal foods as it changes its menu daily and also offers a buffet in the main dining room, which allows for more versatility.

"If we have product that we can feed 200 to 300 people with, we're perfectly well off,"

Chef Klein says. "If we did the same menu every day, day in and day out, that could be a problem with some of the small producers."

The Conference Center offers not only organic and local foods, but also organic vodkas, local beers and organic wines from local wineries.

"There's an old saying, 'Think Globally and Act Locally.' If you want to change the world, you start close to home," Chef Klein says. "We feel like it's important to support the small farmers, the small growers, the small cheese makers and the berry producers. It's important to have a strong local economy because that's what feeds us."

Right now, sourcing local and organic foods can be expensive. Still, both chefs hope that in the future the cost will continue to go down as the demand for sustainable foods goes up.

"While it is a concern, thinking that you're going to be stepping into the higher food cost for some things, to me it's like anything else. When there's more demand, the prices come down," Chef Marra says. "It's like DVD players. The first one was \$1,000, and now you can get one for \$49."

Ultimately, the commitment by Emory University and Emory Conference Center to sustainable foods is an effort to make a difference in its community.

"Sustainably grown, healthy food is a really important shift all over the country, and it unites all kinds of people," Emory's Barlett says. "It reweaves the community in a way that's very positive."

"This isn't a fad anymore," agrees Chef Marra. "It's the future."

"The more fresh fruits and vegetables you can eat, the research shows pretty clearly that that's good for you in terms of heart disease and cancer and other health threats," Barlett adds. "We also hope that it will address some of the obesity epidemic issues and help people feel that they have good, healthy choices every day."

Plus, using local and sustainable foods just feels right.

"It ties back to the farm and the family," Cook says. "I get pictures from the farmer that grows the green beans. I know that I'm supporting him and his family. It just means more." ■



PHOTOS BY HAGWOOD STUDIOS

White Oak Pastures all organic grass-fed beef, salad of local baby red and green oak leaf lettuce and caramelized carrots.